

BLIZZARD OF '49, WYOMING PUBLIC TELEVISION ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Speaker 1: Okay Jack, give me your name.

Jack: Jack L. Garner.

Speaker 1: Where were you during the blizzard of '49?

Jack: I was in Crawford, Nebraska.

Speaker 1: I think we'd talked before about digging out a railroad engine?

Jack: Well, yes. I was in my senior year of school and during that prior summer I had worked for the railroad. They laid me off and put me on their extra board, subject to recall. I think after the storm really cleared, somebody came and notified me that they needed me to report to the section house in Crawford on the Burlington Railroad and to dress well because we were going to go north to Horn, Nebraska which was a section house area. We were going to shovel out a stuck locomotive.

So I did, I dressed as well as I could and put on my old sheepskin I think my granddad had given me. My section foreman had schooled me pretty well and told me basically how to dress. He said it was going to be really cold and one of the tricks he had to wrap your shoes in newspaper inside your overshoes, which is all we had. We didn't have packs them days. And wear light socks, not heavy wool socks. Mom, she added a little of her touch to it and gave me a brown paper bag with eye holes [00:02:00] and a nose hole in it and I put that over my head. We walked north about 7 miles against the wind and it was still cold. If I recall, it was pretty clear. We dodged around various drifts.

This engine had left some open areas that had gone and became stuck in the snow. There was a whole lot of us. I don't remember. There was probably 25 or 30 people that they had rounded up. Some local Indians and just some of us kids that had worked on the railroad and other people that they could get.

Speaker 1: You had to walk because there was no roads?

Jack: We had to walk and there was no roads open that you could go by vehicle and at the time there was no trains or anything. That one engine had been the only thing through probably from Alliance. So anyway, we walked that 7 miles and I don't recall really but we found a pathway all the way there and here's this big engine stuck in a snowdrift. We learned pretty quick why he was in there. To describe the engine, he had a flat car on the front end loaded with rails, a lot of

steel, and on the front of the flat car was a V plow blade. We learned what had happened. He also had a water tender which was a water car, like an oil tanker car, and he had used the water out of that tanker rather than out of his the tender that was on the back of the engine. So it was lightweight and [00:04:00] apparently when he got stuck in the snowdrift and tried to back up, this lightweight tank car became grounded. It went off the rails. He didn't really know why he was stuck until our gang got up there and started shoveling. That's what we found. It was on the ground.

We dug out the engine, shoveled and shoveled and shoveled. A lot of the snow, we threw into the tender and like it's been said before, that was really pretty hard snow. Some of us had our own shovels and some had the railroad shovels. I don't know, it was a big old steam locomotive. It was a big machine and we had to clear a lot of snow and it took a long time. Then I remember about dark, a diesel Zephyr that Burlington had just gotten at that time came and brought us lunches. We got in these old shacks along the track that used to be railroad cars in the early days. We had sack lunches in there. I remember saying before that it was pretty smelly in that place with sweaty guys you know and everything.

Anyway, we got the thing all shoveled out and they did what they call attached frogs along the rails. It's an apparatus that is used to bring a car that is on the [00:06:00] ground up onto the tracks. You put it in front of the wheels and then the engine will start and pull it forward. The car will actually come back on the tracks. I think you use 4 frogs, 1 on each set of trucks underneath the tanker. Then as I recall, the diesel engine took that car back into Crawford. I don't know if he ever brought it back and hooked it on or not. The engine was headed for Sheraton probably or as far as it needed to go with that plow.

Speaker 1: Were you there all day?

Jack: We were there all day and into the night and I think probably we went back to town sometime in the night. Probably around midnight or so. We rode the Zephyr back. Of course, I wasn't lucky enough to get in the cab where the engineer and the crew were. We road alongside the engine and in that diesel engine, we were busting drifts going home. The wind was still blowing. It was not snowing anymore but the wind was still blowing and it was closing in in those open areas. You'd stand in there and that engine would just shutter like that when you'd go through one of those drifts and snow filtered through the vents that were on that engine, [00:08:00] where the air flows through for the diesel engines.

Speaker 1: Was Crawford hit pretty badly by the storm?

Jack: The town was, the business area. You couldn't go anywhere with a car. I had an old Model A Ford and after we got it all thawed out and everything, I still couldn't go anywhere.

Speaker 1: You told me the story about having to light a fire underneath it?

Jack: Yeah, we had to build a fire under it. I had an oil pressure gauge and I did get it started but the pressure gauge didn't show any pressure. So, Dad told me I better shut it off pretty quick. That oil was probably congealed. I always made the joke that I would never Conical oil again because that's what oil I had in there.

Eventually, I was able to come and go and I remember when the trains, they'd run. We had a lot of heavy equipment around there in town that came in on the railroad. Of course we've got both railroads in Crawford, the Northwestern and the Burlington. Of course, the Northwestern would come out of probably Shadron and on east of there and go through Harrison and up here to Lusk and on west of Lusk.

Speaker 1: This equipment, was it military equipment do you recall?

Jack: Yeah, I remember quite a bit of military equipment. I remember weasels, a lot of weasels. It was a type of a small vehicle. Somebody said tanks one time. I don't remember seeing any tanks. The highway department, they had probably what they called FWDs but every town didn't have them, the highway departments. They had to come from a central location [00:10:00] and most of them were rotary types. Otherwise, they were just plows with blades on trucks. There was a lot of activity in the town because we had sidings there in Crawford and they would unload. That's really about all I personally remember about it. I was a town kid and I had relatives on the farm. We didn't have a telephone. We had a little old, I guess at the time, was a 4 room house, 6 kids, our family. Grocery stores, I didn't have any problems. Mom would send us down for groceries and stuff. We burned coal. Dad always made sure we had plenty of coal in the winter time.

Speaker 1: I know he didn't do it during the blizzard of '49 but I think you were talking about your dad driving a snowplow?

Jack: Yeah.

Speaker 1: Can you tell me about hooking ...

Jack: Well, I don't remember if it was the '49 blizzard. One time he worked for the highway department out of Crawford and he drove a FWD and he remembered

he learned one thing, never hook your thumbs around the spokes in a steering wheel, because you never knew what you were going to hit. If it did yank the wheel right out of your hands, you could break a thumb or two. He said the danger of that was also cars. To come up on a car, you had to be pretty wary of ... I remember that snowdrift out of Crawford was at least 15 or 20 feet high on Highway 20. I've seen pictures [00:12:00] of the railroad on Northwestern coming into Harrison and towards Lusk. They had a pretty rough time. It took a while to clear those railroads and the highways. I think people got a little impatient but us town people, we were pretty well off considering what the farmers and ranchers had to go through.

Speaker 1: Do you remember what the railroad paid you for doing that shovel job?

Jack: I kept trying to think. It wasn't any more than 75 cents an hour and if we got overtime, they paid us overtime. They treated us all really good, the railroad did. I don't remember having to work any past that incident. It's really kind of vague. I knew I couldn't get my Model A Ford out. I thought I could go any place with that Model A Ford, but I found out I couldn't.

Speaker 1: You said you were working with local Indians?

Jack: Yeah. Indians used to come there to pick corn and potatoes in the fall into probably November. Some of them would just stay. We had a tent encampment there a lot of times. The Indian people were out to make a little money if they could. They were pretty destitute people. They didn't have much of anything. Imagine some of them probably lived in just a canvas tent in that '49 blizzard. I used to deliver papers to them. I don't remember. That was earlier on in my life. They were really pretty nice people, I didn't have a deadbeat [00:14:00] in the bunch. I'd go downtown and people might be home but they sure didn't answer the door when I went around to collect but those Indians always paid me.

Speaker 1: Decent folks.

Jack: Yeah. So anyway, like I say, I guess I was pretty lucky to be a town kid during those times. My dad worked and mom was a housewife.

Speaker 1: Did you live in just a separate detached house?

Jack: Yeah, we had a house and an outhouse and a shed for the coal and wood.

Speaker 1: Did you have to shovel?

Jack: Oh yeah, us kids took care of the yard and all that kind of stuff, shoveling.

Speaker 1: I remember bad storms in Detroit.

Jack: We lived in the north end of town which is not the uptown part of the little town. It was dirt roads and gravel roads, dirt alleys, mud when it rained in the spring and a lot of snow in the winter.

Speaker 1: Do you recall the spring thaw after this big blizzard?

Jack: No, I don't really recall. I know we had a lot of water, a lot of mud. We used to have a viaduct under the railroad in Crawford and it used to flood when it rained. I think it probably flooded when the snow melted.

Speaker 1: Great. If you can't think of anything else, I think that's what we covered last time. That's good.

Jack: Yeah. No, I can't think of another thing.

Speaker 1: All right. Thanks so much Jack.

Jack: You're welcome.